

Community Connections: Men, Gender, and Violence
A Synthesis of the Paper and Online Discussion
June 10, 2003

In their paper, Fernando Mederos and Julia Perilla described current responses to intimate partner violence, recognizing both the vital role and limitations of the institutional responses spearheaded by the criminal justice system and batterer intervention programs. While acknowledging that coordinated community response initiatives (CCRIs) are a life-saving innovation, they also summarized the unintended negative consequences of relying solely on CCRIs: 1) they serve only a small number of the women affected by domestic violence; 2) they reach only a small number of abusive men; 3) they use standardized batterer intervention programs and ignore other avenues of engagement with men; and 4) they are not designed to address the poverty and unemployment many of their participants face. The paper offered examples of alternative approaches and programs that are reaching out, through preventative community education, to abusers and to men who are at risk of becoming abusers; engaging men in ways that reflect a deep knowledge of their cultural backgrounds and life challenges; and working with other community agencies to reach out to men about ending intimate partner violence.

This paper prompted a lively discussion, with 61 postings from 45 different individuals. Some participants expressed their hope for greater flexibility in shaping and funding CCRIs. Increased flexibility would allow more men to have the conversations they desperately need to have regarding their attitudes towards violence and towards women. Others described the need for mutual respect among facilitators of batterer intervention programs and providers of services for women survivors, to overcome the history of distrust. To truly be effective in transforming society, we must be able to creatively address the conflicts that arise in our efforts to collaborate. We cannot teach others to do what we cannot do ourselves. Many service providers for domestic violence victims are moving toward recognizing that quality services to men who batter constitute a service to victims, and not something that presents a competing interest. As one participant put it, “organizations that work with men have the delicate, yet awesome, responsibility of helping to heal those who wound, without losing sight of the wounded.” The batterer intervention programs that have developed ongoing involvement with women advocates have a strong commitment to keeping battered women's reality central to their work.

There were many comments about how to develop batterer intervention programs that are truly responsive to culture. In this discussion about culturally appropriate programs, it was important not to perpetuate false stereotypes about men of color being more violent than white men, but to be clear that white men must also look at how their cultures condone and/or discourage violence. We were cautioned to remember that different communities' experiences of violence are mediated by structural forms of oppression, such as racism, colonialism, and economic exploitation. Different cultures have different definitions for what constitutes abuse. Child abuse research cited suggested that parents who were able to stop their abuse did so because they reached a new understanding of how they defined abuse. Batterer intervention programs, as part of a culturally competent approach, can help men reconnect with traditions from their cultural backgrounds that

promote healthy and non-abusive relationships with women.

Part of the discussion centered on ways to get non-court-mandated men to participate in batterer intervention programs. One suggestion was to describe programs more in terms of anger management. Others were not willing to go this route because they do not want people to continue to see intimate partner violence as an anger management problem. There was also the concern that judges mandating batterers to programs might not understand the difference between a short-term, anger management class and a batterer intervention program, and only order violent men to the former.

In thinking about alternatives to CCRIIs, some participants described the criminal justice system as operating under the false notion that punishment, alone, for violence would keep men from doing it. Other approaches could focus less on shaming the abusive man, and instead help him understand the impact of his violence, heal, and change his behavior. However, one participant pointed out that without the criminal justice system we currently have, we could not even be having a discussion like this. The criminal justice system responses have brought critical public attention to the problem of violence against women, as well as many resources to address the problem. They continue to hold the solid ground the movement has gained thus far. This does not preclude developing additional approaches, including working with faith-based organizations, schools, and grassroots organizations on prevention efforts.

There was a brief exchange, in response to a query, about the fees batterer intervention programs charge and the advantages and disadvantages of offering community service alternatives to payment for poor men. Fees varied, with many programs offering sliding scale rates. For some programs, the option of community service involved too much case management by staff, or was underutilized. Fees often helped fund victim services, and although men may resent the fees, often they resent the overall process as much or more. However, for victims who are relying on financial support from the abuser, fees the abuser must pay for classes may take away money she would otherwise have for groceries and other household needs.

The postings included recommendations for the work going forward. One participant recommended that systems change work include advocating for more resources to expand on the groundbreaking efforts already in place, without depleting the insufficient funding currently available. The research that guides program development is influenced and limited by Western culture and notions. By listening to the communities we serve—be they domestic violence survivors, men who have been violent, people of color—we can design programs that better serve their needs and are more effective at reducing violence against women. Men who have been batterers and are no longer violent can facilitate batterer intervention programs and lead educational efforts, able to speak about the process of recovery first hand. Many participants suggested that in our work with men who batter we must all start with ourselves, not set ourselves apart from them, or use power-based strategies while asking the men not to do the same with their partners.

References included in the postings:

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Stosny, Steven. 1995. "Treating Attachment Abuse: A Compassionate Approach" NY: Springer Pub. Co.

Online articles by Stosny available at this website:

<http://www.compassionpower.com/articles.html>